

Case Study Guide: Winters Hotel Fire

This case study is based on a fatal fire at the Winters Hotel in Vancouver on April 11, 2022, that took the lives of Mary Ann Garlow and Dennis James Guay and the subsequent coroner's inquest.

Information for this case study was gathered from news reports and the Coroner's Inquest report. The news reports have not been fact checked.

The purpose of this case study is to initiate a discussion in a safe space for participants to share their observations and opinions. At the conclusion of your case review we ask that you answer some questions anonymously. We hope that comments from participants create an open discussion that will allow for the sharing of ideas.

The questions to reflect on:

- What is your reaction to this situation?
- What factors influenced this event?
- What should be done to minimize the potential of other similar events?

Chief Coroner or Chief Medical Examiner Role

Each Province and Territory in Canada have a Chief Medical Examiner or a Chief Coroners that investigate deaths in their jurisdiction. Statistics Canada compiles the information provided by the thirteen jurisdictions into a minimal data base called the Canadian Coroner and Medical Examiner Database.

Provincial and Territorial coroners and medical examiners are required to investigate sudden and unexpected deaths according to the Fatalities Act for their jurisdiction. Some jurisdictions also require the investigation of hospital deaths, child deaths, deaths occurring in nursing homes or deaths of incarcerated persons.

Inquests ordered by the coroner or medical examiner are formal proceedings held to review the circumstances of a death. They hear evidence from witnesses to determine the facts of a death. The presiding coroner or medical examiner ensures the procedure maintains the goal of fact-finding, not fault-finding.

The provincial and territorial coroners and medical examiners hold data on deaths reported to their offices. They investigate approximately 15 to 20 percent of all deaths. Although the criteria for reporting deaths vary somewhat by jurisdiction, natural deaths account for approximately 50% of all cases. The unnatural deaths are subdivided into accidents or unintentional injuries, suicides, homicides, and events of undetermined intent.

In this case an inquest was held to:

- address community concern about a death,
- assist in finding information about the deceased or circumstances around a death,
- and to draw attention to a cause of death if such awareness can prevent future deaths.

The Incident

Background:

The Winters Hotel, a supportive housing facility for low-income individuals in Vancouver's downtown east side, tragically burned on April 11, 2022, claiming the lives of two residents, Mary Ann Garlow and Dennis James Guay.

The building was owned by Mr. Peter Plett and operated by Atira Property Management Inc. as supportive housing for low-income people. Single-room occupancy hotels, also known as SRO's, where residents live in small rooms that do not have their own bathrooms or kitchens, provide housing for some of Vancouver's poorest and most marginalized people. The Atira Women's Resource Society received 1.5 million dollars from BC Housing to operate the building.

Seven small businesses also rented retail space on the ground floor.

Incident and Response:

On April 8, 2022, three days before the fatal blaze, Vancouver Fire Rescue Service (VFRS) responded to another fire at the same hotel. Despite the sprinkler system being operational during the first fire, concerns were raised as the fire alarm system did not sound. VFRS issued a violation notice, see Appendix A, to Atira Property Management, the building's manager, urging prompt restoration of both the fire alarm and sprinkler systems.

The VFRS violation notice also required a 24 hour per day fire watch to be placed on the facility until the fire alarm system was reset and fully functional. A VFRS member acknowledged the document did not provide additional details on what exactly the fire watch should entail and told the inquest he couldn't recall the specifics of his conversation with the building manager, Gina Vanenberg, of Atira Property Management.

On April 11 VFRS responded to another call at the Winters Hotel. This time the fire resulted in the two fatalities and total loss of the structure.

Building Demolition:

Demolition of the building was delayed due to safety concerns as can be seen in this video.

During the demolition process the two bodies were recovered.

VFRS Fire Investigation Findings:

According to news media, Vancouver Fire Rescue Services' fire investigation report says the fire started when a tenant left candles burning on their bed.

According to the report, a building worker told fire investigators that just one week before the fire he found 20 to 40 candles on a plate burning on the floor of the tenant's room. The same staffer told investigators that when he looked inside the door of the tenant's room during the April 11 fire, he noticed a melted pool of wax on the floor.

The report uncovered a series of oversights, including empty fire extinguishers, inadequate fire safety training, and a failure to replace essential safety equipment after the initial fire. Despite regulations mandating a fire watch after the first incident, deficiencies in oversight persisted.

When fire investigators visited the tenant in new housing several weeks after the fire, they noticed candles on the tenant's bed. The tenant told investigators that they use candles when they smoke cigarettes and other drugs, and said it was possible they had left a candle unattended in their room at the Winters hotel. They also told investigators they had accidentally set their own hair on fire twice a few weeks before the April 11 fire because of their habit of leaving candles burning on their bed.

VFRS investigators say they considered the possibility the fire had been deliberately set, but they ruled out that theory after reviewing video evidence from a security camera they recovered from the building.

Investigators also used the video footage to confirm that another resident, had resorted to trying to put out the fire with water from a bucket when he was unable to find a working fire extinguisher.

Coroner's Inquest and Witnesses:

A coroner's inquest was initiated to investigate the circumstances surrounding the deaths. Witnesses, including former residents and VFRS personnel, testified to various deficiencies in fire safety protocols and building management.

A former resident of the Winters Hotel highlighted issues about the lack of fire safety education and rampant building maintenance problems. Additionally, concerns were raised about the lack of communication regarding the "fire watch" status and the disabling of the sprinkler system after the initial fire.

The witness told the inquest that he moved into the Winters Hotel in 2018. Atira staff did not provide any information regarding fire safety when he arrived, and he never participated in any fire drills during his time living in the building.

The witness said he was never informed that the building was under "fire watch" or that the sprinkler system had been turned off after the smaller fire.

The hotel with more than 70 residents was riddled with mice and cockroaches, and debris filled the hallways, sometimes blocking doorways, he said.

"There was no single day that I didn't see any blockage," he said of the hallways.

The witness also said the building manager who is the same person VFRS spoke with, threatened him with eviction after he told her he had complained to the City of Vancouver about how Atira staff were handling residents' concerns.

Review of Coroner's Inquest Finding:

Review the coroner's inquest finding at this link: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/inquest/2024/quay_verdict.pdf

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The tragic events at Winters Hotel underscore the critical importance of stringent fire safety protocols. Recommendations stemming from the incident emphasize:

- the need for improved communication between building management and residents
- comprehensive fire safety training for staff
- stringent adherence to regulatory standards regarding safety equipment maintenance

Conclusion

The Winters Hotel fire serves as a sobering reminder of the vulnerabilities faced by marginalized communities and the imperative need for robust safety measures in social housing facilities. Through diligent oversight, enhanced training, and proactive maintenance, future tragedies can be prevented, ensuring the safety and well-being of all residents.

Answer the following questions:

- Who is responsible for the fire safety of this building? Provide code reference if applicable.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the building's fire protection systems in containing the fire.


- Suggest additional measures that could have prevented the loss of life in this fire.

- How often should buildings of this type be inspected to ensure fire safety, and what specific areas should be the focus of these inspections?


Answer Key and Comments

- The building owner or their authorized agent is responsible for carrying out the provisions of the fire code. (See Division C Part 2 Article 2.2.1.1)
- The fire sprinkler system was effective during the first fire, but the fire alarm system and portable fire extinguishers may have been inoperable. The fire protection systems were inoperable during the second fire.
- Training of the building owner/manager may have helped to mitigate the spread of fire. This should be through regular ongoing training involving familiarization with the active and passive fire protection systems and the fire safety plan for the building.
- Fire protection system inspection, testing, and maintenance by a qualified technician immediately after the first fire.
- Proper instruction and training for fire watch personnel.
- Instructions to occupants prohibiting the use of candles and open flames.
- Occupants should have initial familiarization with the buildings fire safety plan before occupancy. Ongoing annual training should be mandatory and provided in conjunction with and as specified by the fire safety plan. Regular fire drills should be performed.
- Regular building assessments should be carried out by the owner, manager or operator daily, weekly, monthly, or annually as specified in the fire code or fire safety plan. Records of all building assessments and training should be kept.
- Fire protection systems like the fire sprinkler, fire alarm, emergency lighting and exit signs should undergo inspection, testing, and maintenance by qualified technicians as required by the fire code and referenced documents. These requirements should also be identified in the fire safety plan.
- Inspections by qualified fire inspectors should be carried out as often as possible on a random basis so normal operating conditions can be assessed.
- A code change to include a specific occupancy classification for SRO should be considered.

Appendix A



CITY OF
VANCOUVER



FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES
NOTICE OF VIOLATION
General

Firehall Office Use only

☐ Routine Inspection

☐ Entered into FDM :

☐ Incident

 Date: _____

Date: 8 Apr 2022 Time: 2020

Address of Violation: 203 Abbott St Business/Name: _____

Business Owner: _____ Phone #: _____ Fax #: _____

Person Notice Given To: _____ Title: _____ Phone#: _____

Receipt of Notice: _____ (signature)

ITEM	CODE	Vancouver Fire By-Law Violations - FOR IMMEDIATE COMPLIANCE
	6.1.1.5.(2) DIV B	<input type="checkbox"/> Have Portable Fire Extinguishers serviced by ASTTBC qualified technician, and service tag securely affixed to serviced equipment.
	6.1.1.5.(1) DIV B	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Have FIRE ALARM SYSTEM serviced by ASTTBC qualified technician, and service tag securely affixed to serviced equipment.
	6.1.1.5.(1) DIV B	<input type="checkbox"/> Have EMERGENCY LIGHTING SYSTEMS serviced by ASTTBC qualified technician, and service tag securely affixed to serviced equipment.
	6.1.1.5.(1) DIV B	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Have SPRINKLER SYSTEM serviced by ASTTBC qualified technician, and service tag securely affixed to serviced equipment.
	2.7.1.6.(1) DIV B	<input type="checkbox"/> Ensure all means of egress and access to exits are clear and free of any obstructions at all times.
	2.1.5.1.(2) DIV B	<input type="checkbox"/> Provide 5lbs "ABC" Class Portable Fire Extinguisher.
	6.1.1.4.(1) DIV B	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Provide 24 Hour Fire Watch until such time that fire alarm system is reset and fully functional.
		- Have unit # s.22(1) SMOKE DETECTORS
		RETURNED TO PROPER WORKING ORDER